DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 082 251 CS 500 416

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TITLE The Struggle to Know, the Struggle to Survive.
INSTITUTION Speech Communication Association, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Nov 72
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Black Communication Conference (Pittsburgh, Pa., November 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *African American Studies; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Information Theory; Linguistics; Negro Culture; Negro Dialects; Negroes; *Racism
IDENTIFIERS *Afro American Communication

ABSTRACT

The factors of race, politics, economics, and the social sciences provide a unique dilemma for black communication scholars. Such scholars must respond to forces which seek to suppress their work and must also seek better ways of understanding the unique characteristics of communication among blacks. Investigations in black English should seek an understanding of the black's linguistic past and present, as well as the black's language usage as it affects the quality of his children's education and his efforts to succeed in his occupation. However, much research by whites in black communication mistakenly concentrates on "street talk" and is adversely affected by two racial assumptions: first, that blacks are basically happy, sensuous people, and second, that extensive use of profanity is a distinctive characteristic of all black communication. Therefore, although communication studies by whites can help blacks gain a better understanding of themselves, they do little to contribute to their struggle for liberation. Black scholars' research offers greater promise. (RN)

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THE STRUGGLE TO KNOW, THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

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Prepared for Black Communication Conference
University of Pittsburgh

November 5-11, 1972

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CS 500 #16

THE STRUGGLE TO KNOW, THE STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

For the Black man, to know and to survive become one, and his survival in any number of ways bears grim witness to his success in learning about his world in a way that enables him not only to live in it but to wrest from it a measure of happiness and hope. The Black researcher in communication is no exception. The man in the street usually confronts threats to his existence in direct and often brutal ways: the loss of a job, the inability to get another, and the surrounding squalor that mocks his efforts to hold on to his dignity. His language usually is direct and unequivocable, expressing the intensity and depth of his desperation. In contrast, the Black academician studies communication among Blacks and at the same time responds to the prevalent White notions about Black communication.

Here is where the central issue is joined. While the confrontation of the Black man in the street may be more direct and even violent, the more gentlemanly and sometimes seemingly irrelevant discussions in the social sciences may be more important to the survival of Blacks. For the social sciences, and I do count communication among these studies, reflect and often seek to justify our national intentions. Ralph Ellison has said it very well:

> This was a period, the 1870's, wherein scientific method, with its supposed objectivity and neutrality to values was thought to be the answer to all problems . . . There is no better example of the confusion and opportunism springing from this false

> assumption than the relation of American social science to the Negro problem. And let us make no easy distinctions here between Northern and Southern social scientists; both groups used their graphs, charts and other paraphernalia to prove the Negro's biological, psychological, intellectual and moral inferiority; one group to justify the South's exploitation of Negroes and the other to justify the North's refusal to do anything about it.

The Black scholar then cannot afford the deceptive luxury of seeing his research or scholarship divorced from politics and economics. For whenever the fate of Blacks has been the issue, democratic principles and morality have most often taken a back seat to popular sentiment and profit. Blacks have become the most obvious and inescapable contradiction in the American experience. They have forced Whites to confront the ambiguity of proclaiming freedom to the world while denying it to them, which has also forced Whites to wrestle with this dilemma and prodded them into a confrontation with their conscience. The scenario has become an American ritual: Blacks rail against the undemocratic and oppressive practices of our society; Whites then agonize over these injustices; and the oppression for the most part continues unchanged. Although Blacks may sometimes describe the race question as a White problem, they have shown no inclination to turn it over to Whites for a resolution. Thus, the Black communicationist is never free to choose his ground or his subject: a part of him must always respond

to those attacks which seek to dehumanize and oppress him, as another part of him yearns to better understand some aspect of communication among his people. Although in conflict, he knows the stakes are quite high, his survival.

I would like to discuss one issue in the social sciences that illustrates the close relationship among politics, economics and race and also stresses how the social sciences labor to reflect popular sentiment. It is Black English[1]; this dialect has attracted the attention of a number of linguists and educators during the last seven years.

An observation by a Black linguist, Beryl Bailey, pointed out that the speech of American and Jamaican Blacks shared certain linguistic features. She further theorized that the speech of both groups may be derived from a common creole source. This and other observations unleashed a flurry of articles that sought to make dialect of singular importance in understanding the Black past and present.

A few creolists searched documents and scurried into the past to discover that there were similarities between the present Black

[1]Black English is defined here as the dialect spoken primarily by Blacks of the working and nonworking classes. It goes without saying that the speech and communicative act of Blacks encompass much more than what is narrowly defined as Black English by linguists. But again, this could be said of most any other dialect or language, and the work of broadening our definition of language to include style and other vital cultural patterns is still before us.

dialect and certain West African languages. They observed that creole languages developed where the economically and militarily stronger European countries made contact with the weaker African tribes. The Black Africans borrowed the vocabulary of the European language and inserted it into their grammatical structure. Quite often this coming together of two languages produced a simplified hybrid language through which the African was able to communicate with the more powerful European. The creolist called on the works of Lorenzo Turner and Melville Herskowitz to point to the African culture that the slaves brought to the New World. These students of language discovered that the slaves, who may have come from different tribes, often were able to communicate with each other, for their tribal languages were sometimes similar. Other slaves spoke creole. So thanks to a few writers, mostly White, a small portion of the academic community discovered that Blacks held a number of attributes in common with other humans: first, they had a history, culture, and even a language about which there is some controversy as to its history and influence upon English; second, when enslaved and shipped to this country, they brought their culture and past with them, for such stuff is held by people, certainly not by the land; and third, these Blacks undoubtedly were shaped by their American experience but more importantly they played a major role in shaping what we currently call the American culture.

Unquestionably I, as many other Blacks, am appreciative of these efforts to establish the humanity of Blacks again. For in the barest of terms, the creolists are saying only that Blacks are human, and our study of language proves it. And that such an assertion is needed speaks to the racist thought and practices which continue to dehumanize Blacks.

How does Black English become a political or economic question? Simply some of these White writers did not stop at unearthing a Black past but moved to show that Black dialect explained the miseducation of Black children, that the difference between the standard White dialect of the schools and the Black dialect interferred with the learning of Black children. And it followed quite naturally that the answer to the Black child's problem lay in teaching him to read in his dialect. These writers arrived at this solution to the Black child's educational woes not through experimental research but through reason and undoubtedly good intentions.

Efforts to introduce dialectal readers into the schools were resisted by a cross section of the Black community, such as middle class Black teachers, the Black working class, and the Black Muslims. Ironically Whites found themselves in the position of defining blackness. It seemed that if one were appropriately Black he would embrace Black English; if not, he was too middle-class and somehow had

fallen from blackness.

Regardless of the issue, Blacks have a fundamental grasp of what it means to be black in America and what their struggle is all about. For most Blacks, as perhaps with most other Americans, to speak standard English, whatever it may or may not be, is an economic necessity. Blacks who are struggling to survive and to make a way for themselves in business and industry are also striving to acquire that speech and language which they have come to associate with success. They know that the reasons they have been excluded in America have nothing to do with language but that language, as well as many other conditions, can become one more reason to exclude them. To use dialectal readers in a country that is already divided by race and poverty is to institutionalize a low prestige dialect in the schools. Naturally the proponents of dialectal readers argue that these readers would be used only in the early grades and that the children would then be shifted to standard English readers. Given the history of all poor people with the schools, and especially the history of Black people with public education in America, there is no reason for anyone to believe that the shift to readers in standard English would ever take place. Hence, the poor Black would become further locked into the lowest rung of the economic ladder and his speech would be used to justify his condition, to explain why

he could not succeed.

Although linguists and others for political reasons may encourage Blacks to have pride in their speech and language, such pride comes hard and may blossom only in the fantasies of the proponents of dialect readers. For I have yet to meet an advocate of Black English for instruction or cultural pride who did not have at his command a speech that was standard enough for him to move with ease within educational and professional circles. So we are confronted with an interesting phenomenon, a group of middle class folks prescribing a stigmatized way of speaking for others, stigmatized both by its speakers and the middle class. And the works of Roger Shuy and Alfred Hayes and Orlando Taylor seem to indicate that the speakers of this dialect do not regard it highly. It is no wonder that Blacks of many callings and positions have resisted dialectal instruction.

There is another aspect to the resistence of Blacks to formalizing dialect in the schools. Toward whatever end, Blacks are in the position to determine what is best for them. And given the past success of professional educators and social scientists in educating the poor, there is greater reason to trust the judgment of Black parents and teachers.

The arguments continue over the kind of education that a Black child should receive, especially the poor Black child. For the

middle-class Black child receives, for the most part, the same kind of education as his White peer. For example in Washington, D. C., a large number of Black middle-class parents send their children to private schools, others have moved to the suburbs, and others to areas within the District where there are more Whites and the schools are reputed to be better. And although the government has supported Headstart and various other compensatory educational programs, they seem to have achieved little. Recent studies by Mosteller and Moynihan suggest that there is almost a one to one relationship between success in the schools and socioeconomic status. In fact they suggest that the school problem might best be solved by implementing fair employment practices or more succinctly by providing decent incomes for the poor. These observations were also found to be true for all other minority groups, such as the Indians and the Chicanos.

It is obvious that whatever research is done or whatever positions are taken by Black communicationists regarding speech-language and education they will undoubtedly have far reaching consequences for a large number of Black people. Those who oppose educating minorities will again look to the social sciences to justify their positions. For it never has been politically expedient or economically worthwhile to educate the poor Black. And there does not

seem to be any rush to eliminate poverty or racism in this country. Thus, the Black communicationist cannot for the forseeable future fail to respond to issues and questions which may decide the educational or economic fate of the majority of Blacks.

Surprisingly a few Black writers find time to look at the communicative act among Blacks. Both Black and White writers are looking at how Black people communicate and how this particular act relates to what it means to be Black in America and how it seems to suggest quite strongly that perhaps we have at least two cultures at work here, which are different in some rather fundamental respects. The notion of subcultures belonging to one parent culture may be in for a fatal assault. Yet in spite of the work that is being done on Black communication, it has failed to escape the racist influence of our country.

The current research on Black communication seems to be inordinately concerned with the street talk of Black people. Terms, such as sounding, signifying, and the dozens, have become commonplace in our literature. It is not unusual to hear middle-class Whites, when in the presence of Blacks, use such terms as motherfucker or even the more acceptable mother, which, I suppose, indicates that the user is in the know. What are my objections?

First, it appears that the interest in the Black man has not changed over the years. Whites have always been interested in the fun-aspect of the Black experience; here I refer to the weary notion that Blacks have been and are happy, sensuous people who really know how to live. Our dancing, our supposedly abandoned and thoroughly consuming and infinitely enjoyable sex lives, and our total disregard for tomorrow and all of those other hang-ups which constrain the over-burdened-with-responsibility white man are part of the stereotype. The slave master's nocturnal trips to the quarters and the more recent visits of Whites to blacktown for all kinds of excitement are part of our history. Obviously the riots and present climate in the black community do not encourage such visits as in the past.

So to find the linguists and anthropologists talking about the language of fun and joy should not be unexpected. Most of the literature that deals with the street-language gives any casual reader the impression that if he stands on any street corner at any time of day, he will hear just about every Black man sounding and signifying -- and profanity issuing from his mouth twenty-four hours a day, five days a week. Now I don't mean to imply that Blacks don't do all of these things, and certainly Blacks as a group may be less reluctant to underscore their meaning and feelings

with profanity than Whites.

What is missed in most of these writings is that ritualistic language, such as the dozens, signifying, and other profanity are situationally determined and there are heavy penalties levied against those who violate these constraints. Go into any Black slum and you will discover as many store front churches as fire hydrants, if not more. My only point here is that there are other impulses at work within the Black community, and to understand that community and the communication patterns used among its people, one must, naturally include, but look beyond the street corner. As a Black man who was reared among working and non-working class Blacks, I am firmly of the opinion that it is the religious impulse among Blacks which is far more revealing of what they are as a people and which distinguishes them as a group from Whites. The black church is just one expression of this religious impulse; another may be the hope and confidence exhibited by so many Blacks over the years. Naturally, I am talking about my impressions without the rigor of a discipline or its language to support them.

It appears quite obvious that if Blacks are to understand themselves and what their lives have meant and mean today, they will have to form the questions and do the research. The Black communicationist must leave Whites to the block,[2] and move on into the heart

[2]the street corner.

of the Black community to understand what is being said, what the words mean, and what changes when the way one talks changes.

My second objection is directly related to a middle-class White using profanity in my presence with the racist assumption that all Blacks talk this way. And more, that if you do not, somehow you are not quite Black enough. Aside from the implications of a White person defining what Blackness is and what degree of it is appropriate, which in itself is an unpardonable arrogance, it assumes that there is no class stratification among Blacks, that all Blacks are the same in terms of taste and life-style and that the only valid Black experience is the street-corner variety. Certainly Blacks are all equally the victims of racism, and all Blacks recognize the war against racism as their first priority. And one aspect of racism is to assume that there are no differences among Blacks, not that the reason for pointing out these differences to Whites is for them to treat some Blacks better than others while continuing their general racist behavior. But among all people wherever they are found, and Blacks in America are no different, there are class distinctions, which also translate into behavioral differences.

These class differences among Blacks are most apparent. You have only to see the differences within the working class communities, for example the respect given to older people, to those on their way to church on Sunday morning, or to changes in the behavior of the street-corner crowd when a minister talks with them or when they approach one of their former teachers, hopefully one they respected and liked. As you enter the middle and upper middle-class communities other behavioral patterns emerge which distinguish them from the lower economic classes.

The coalitions worked out among Blacks to fight racism is a recognition of these differences. If one is to solicit the cooperation of another, he has to recognize and respect the differences between them. Blacks are definitely coming to this position. It appears that Whites have not as yet and that they persist in their desire to reconstruct the Black experience around the most stigmatized elements within the community. And the dozens and profanity are but a few examples.

I have attempted to stress the inter-relationship among race, politics, economics, and the social sciences for the purpose of pointing out the rather unique forces operating on the Black communicationist. He is forced to respond to arguments which seek to oppress him and at the same time to engage in research to his liking.

It seems appropriate to ask just what do we expect of research. Certainly you can talk about research for the sake of knowing. Yet when you frame a question about the differences between races in this country, it cannot be taken as just an innocent question. Noam Chomsky has made some observations in this regard:

> Of course, scientific curiosity should be encouraged (though fallacious argument and investigation of silly questions should not), but it is not an absolute value. In fact, it seems that the question of the relation, if any, between race and intelligence has very little scientific importance (as it has no social importance except under the assumptions of a racist society). ...the investigation seems of quite limited scientific interest, and the zeal and intensity with which some pursue or welcome it cannot reasonably be attributed to a dispassionate desire to advance science.

As Black communicationists we cannot reasonably expect research in the social sciences, particularly in the area of communication, to establish the humanity and equality of Blacks for all time or even for a much shorter time. Data from the social sciences did not create racism and certainly cannot obliterate it. Racism emerged as an institution to justify a slave society; the political system of the time supported slavery because it was profitable to do so. The social sciences of the time also found reasons to support slavery and the inferiority of Blacks. For the most part,

the social sciences do not go beyond the sentiments of the time, and they always seem to be in tune with the feelings of the majority. I do not mean to state that all social scientists will agree on any issue. I am saying though that there is always a supporting argument in the social sciences to match the political or economic intention of the moment.

Aside from studying Blacks for the purpose of giving them a better understanding of themselves, there appears to be little that the study of communication can contribute in the current struggle of Black people to become truly liberated in this country. For as far as I can see they, as most minority people, must raise the moral question, that is to speak to what is right and to what ought to be. They must also apply whatever talents they have in the struggle to gain political and economic power for Blacks to determine their destiny, whether in the Black community or in the greater American community. And they must oppose all arguments and data purporting to establish their inferiority. As Black communicationists, as Black men and women, we have no other choice.

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